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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAGR](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: DUTCH INTERCHURCH AID DEPARTS ERITREA AFTER 30
YEARS

REF: ASMARA 235

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) John Veron, Director of the Dutch InterChurch Aid (DIA) office in Eritrea, informed the ambassador August 4 that DIA will be departing Eritrea in the next three months after a presence of nearly 30 years, reducing the number of NGOs in Eritrea to seven. While the official memo sent to the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) stated the office no longer has "added value," Veron confided that the increasing GSE restrictions, inability to obtain fuel, and an overall difficult environment encouraged the DIA home office to close the Asmara field office. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The DIA presence in Eritrea dates back to 1979 during the independence struggle with Ethiopia. At that time, it supported liberated areas with food aid shipped through Sudan, eventually becoming close friends with many current-day top officials. The Asmara field office opened in 1996 as a way of strengthening the bond between Eritrea and DIA.

BUREAUCRATIC DIFFICULTY

¶3. (C) Despite the long history as one of the first NGOs in Eritrea, Veron states, DIA is no longer able to support its efforts due to ever-restrictive government policies. DIA has been without fuel since December 2007 and thus unable to visit and monitor project sites. The GSE has told the NGO to request fuel from zoba (regional) administrators, a DIA effort that met with some success, but even with occasional fuel DIA still does not have enough to run its field office. Veron described another constraint on operations: decisions previously made by local administrators later had to be approved by Directors General, and since 2006 all decisions have had to come from the Minister of Labor herself. The result has been a near halt of aid activities from the increased bureaucratic red tape. Veron mentioned one colleague who, in comparing working environments, stated "North Korea is like heaven compared to Eritrea."

GSE "SELF-RELIANCE" BLOCKING AID RELIEF

¶4. (C) Veron also commented on the GSE policy of self-reliance, which made implementing aid projects next to impossible. According to Veron, DIA was told on several occasions to simply give the money to GSE officials to have

them do the project. The process would, as Veron describes it, reduce DIA into a mere fundraising machine for the GSE, a situation DIA refuses to accept. (Note: The GSE has long claimed it has the ability to implement aid projects at a cheaper and more sustainable rate than foreign aid agencies. GSE strategy involves forcing national service laborers to work on projects for as little as 25 to 75 cents a day. End Note)

15. (C) COMMENT: The woes of DIA are not unique; fuel and travel restrictions have become common GSE tactics to stifle the activities of NGOs in-country. Earlier in the year, the Lutheran World Federation alerted Post to the possibility of its departure if conditions were to worsen (reftel). The departure of DIA will reduce the total count of NGOs independent of the GSE to four: Lutheran World Federation, Catholic Relief Services, Norwegian Church Aid, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Veron mentioned the presence of an additional three NGOs, such as the Refugee Trust International, but described them as direct funnels from international donors to GSE pockets. As the GSE continues to choke the life from its resident NGOs, Post believes several of the remaining organizations will follow DIA's lead and go home. End Comment.
MCMULLEN